

David Dorfman's modern dance piece about abolitionist John Brown coming to USF

By John Fleming, Times Performing Arts Critic

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Choreographer David Dorfman calls his *Disavowal* "a pleasantly challenging piece of dance theater." It's an hourlong work for eight dancers plus a kind of father figure-narrator (Dorfman) and a "host" who seats the audience. It was inspired by the life and legend of John Brown, the radical abolitionist who instigated the slave revolt at Harpers Ferry that helped to spark the Civil War. Brown, a white man, was executed for treason.

Disavowal is being staged by the New York-based David Dorfman Dance this week at the Florida Dance Festival, and it's a chance for audience members to take a little walk on the wild side by being a part of the performance. Before the night is over, audience members will join the dancers onstage.

"We're going to break down the expectation that you're going to pick your own seat and you're going to sit with some level of passivity in the audience and watch us do a piece," Dorfman said recently from France, where he was teaching. "It has a little bit of a strange path, and it's meant to throw people off their balance, audience members and performers alike."

John Brown does not seem like an obvious subject for modern dance. Dorfman, 54, who chairs the dance department at Connecticut College, knew little about the martyred abolitionist until he began his research, which included Russell Banks' novel about Brown, *Cloudsplitter*.

"It's not trying to be a bio-dance," Dorfman said. "It's more about getting at socio-political and personal ideas, concepts and constructs that appeal to me and to our company. Yes, it's about racism, it's about white supremacy, but it's also about happiness. We have these spots that we call our 'happy spots,' whether they be onstage, or in the lobby, or in the audience. We invite people to have conversations with the company members as part of the piece."

Dance critic Marcia B. Siegel, writing about *Disavowal* in the *Hudson Review*, said that using Brown as a subject "gives Dorfman a springboard into the politics of difference in American history, and in the lives of everyday people. *Disavowal* dwells on how we see others, and how we deny parts of ourselves while owning up to other parts."

Audiences tend to resist efforts to break the wall between performer and spectator, and critics have slammed it in reviews of *Disavowal*. "It's a mess, perhaps on purpose, but that doesn't make it any less of a mess," wrote *New York Times* critic Gia Kourlas of a performance in 2009.



"I know audiences are wary of it," Dorfman said. "That makes me more interested in it. It's going toward our uncomfortability as people that has always attracted me in art making. My challenge is getting myself into an artistic situation where I don't know what's going to happen. At the end of this piece when we're calling people to come onstage, the idea is that we're all in this together. We're going to leave the theater and go our separate ways, but we had this hour together and something happened."

In a way, the audience involvement may obscure the dancing, which critic Siegel found to be subtle and natural. "Rather than use the codified language of dance technique, Dorfman makes dance and gesture material out of everyday behavior, like the choreographer Susan Marshall with whom he danced in the 1980s," she wrote. "The pedestrian action expands and modulates into dance-like movement, but it doesn't entirely lose its original character, purpose or feeling. The finished work carries this subliminal meaning even when it looks abstract."

Disavowal is the second piece by a major modern dance choreographer to be seen in the bay area on a Civil War theme. Bill T. Jones' *Serenade/The Proposition*, on the legacy of Abraham Lincoln, was performed by USF dance and theater students in April.

"Bill and I are buddies, we've known each other a long time," Dorfman said. "It was very funny that Bill was doing this giant project on Lincoln and I was delving into John Brown. It's just one of those crazy coincidences that happen in the small world of modern dance."

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Disavowal

David Dorfman Dance will perform the piece at 8 p.m. Thursday at Theatre I as part of the Florida Dance Festival at the University of South Florida in Tampa. \$15, \$22. (305) 310-8080; floridadanceassociation.org.

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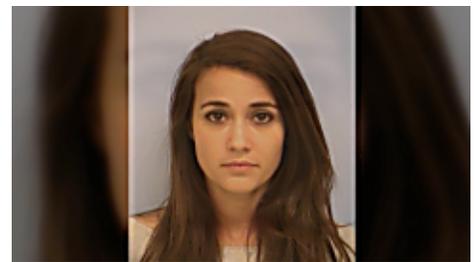
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